3

"A Truly American Spirit of Writing"

Pseudobiblicism, the Early Republic, and the Cultural Origins of the Book of Mormon

1. And it came to pass in those days, that there was no King in all the land, even in all Columbia, but every one walked after the imagination of his own heart.
2. And the people said one to another, "We will choose from among our own numbers Elders to rule over us; even discreet men, out of all the land of Columbia from the borders of the Great Lakes, Northward, till thou comest to the plains of the South, which abounds with Oranges, Pomegranates and Figs.
3. "And let all the Elders meet together in the great city, even the city of Philadelphia, and make laws for us, for why should our goodly heritage be given up to strangers?"

—*THE 1ST BOOK OF THE CHRONICLES OF JOHN*, chap. I (1812)

The text from which the epigraph above is taken is a partisan Democratic tract published originally in the *Richmond Enquirer* and reprinted in the South Carolina *Investigator*, encouraging Americans during the early stages of the War of 1812 to support France ("Gallia") in the hopes of bolstering President Madison's war against Britain ("Albion"). Its language is recognizably biblical, while its content is clearly American, describing an early episode of the late Revolution. *The Book of Chronicles* went on to illustrate in two chapters containing twenty-nine verses that "John," an American patriot elected through the ancient method of casting lots, represented the true interests of the republic (that is, siding with the "Gallians" against the "Albionites") before "the Elders assembled together, even in the city of Philadelphia." By the end of the book "the Elders heard the words that John had spoken, [and] said one to another, 'What manner of man is this? For behold he speaketh the words of truth.'"[1] However eccentric such a rendition may seem to us today, numerous similar tracts were written in America after 1740 for more than a century until the onset of the Civil War, peaking from approximately 1770 to 1830. This unique and previously unfamiliar American

tradition of writing "in the style of antiquity" opens a window onto a lost early American world of biblical imagination.

The language of the King James Bible was as strange and foreign to late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Anglophones as it is to twenty-first-century English-speakers. The paratactic rhythms confined in short and numbered verses, the repetitive use of phrases such as "and it came to pass," and the use of verbs with suffixes such as "-eth" had been long gone from the spoken language by the second half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, generations of Americans reverted to that language and its accompanying structures and forms to discuss their difficulties and represent their achievements, past and present. Surprisingly, this was not a predominantly religious idiom, as Providence was notably absent from those texts as an active agent.[2] Rather, American authors and commentators used this ontologically privileged language as a means to establish their claims for truth, as well as their authority and legitimacy in public discourse.

The distinct use of biblical language for a broad range of topics, notably political issues across the ideological spectrum, thus presents an ideal vantage point from which to appraise and better understand a unique mode of expression that coincided with the emergence of the United States. The nexus of biblical language and politics in early America, or rather the discursive ability to mold the world into revered and well-known structures, provides an indication of the ways in which Americans attempted to understand their role in history in a fast changing world. Through commenting on their experiences in biblical language, Americans perpetuated such practices as typological exegesis and reaffirmed their national role as a second Israel. While the language of the Bible reiterated Americans' understanding of their collective mission, it also positioned politics as the new religion of the republic, a medium that sanctified the nation and articulated Americans' perception of chosenness. Americans were also applying a strict and genteel language in a world that still valued formal and refined forms of expression. Once the United States was overwhelmed by forces unleashed by the market revolution, plain democratic forms of expression repeatedly replaced "aristocratic" discursive modes. A formalistic language that invoked its authority from traditional sources, in the end it could not withstand the democratic onslaught of stump speeches and plain talk.

The Protestant Reformation reinserted the Bible into the lives of millions of believers by declaring *sola scriptura*, "by scripture alone." The implication

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was clear: believers should read and comprehend the Bible with the external mediation of Church or priest, if not discarded altogether, submitted to the supreme authority of the biblical text. That doctrine drove throughout the sixteenth century massive projects of biblical translation into vernacular languages, notably German and English, from the original Hebrew and Greek. Translation into spoken languages allowed Protestants to take possession of the Bible and thus to become their own authority in light of the truths they revealed in Scripture. One of the monumental outcomes of that drive was the translation known as the King James Bible. James I of England (1566–1625) in 1604 established a fifty-four-member committee working in six companies at Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford to produce a new translation of the Scriptures; the project was intended to eradicate mistakes and clarify misunderstandings (or inconvenient theological and political interpretations) stemming from earlier versions, particularly the popular Calvinistic Geneva Bible (1560). The translation was completed in 1611 and was to be the last and greatest of the official committee bibles: the flow of early modern biblical translations ceased in England thereafter. The sixteenth-century impulse to articulate the Bible in the vernacular was thus followed by a period of stagnation in the field of biblical translation. Within this context of the textual stability, the King James Version would become after 1700 universally acclaimed both in Britain and in America as the great Bible of English literature.[3]

If the vernacular Bible had bridged the gap between heaven and earth, it had also underscored the human side of the biblical text. Hence, as Christopher Hill has noted, a Pandora's box opened once the Scriptures were translated into the vernacular and mass printed: the vernacular Bible could not but be seen, at least partly, as the product of human labor and art. Making use of biblical texts for contemporary needs was thus seen in post-Reformation England not necessarily as sacrilege but as the continuation of a process which sixteenth-century translators had initiated. Consequently, during the seventeenth century England experienced a spectacular flowering of biblical poetic writing, making the Bible for the first time not only a source of revealed truth but also a spring for poetic art. By the eighteenth century authors such as Isaac Watts accommodated "Protestant Poetics" to the sensibilities of the Augustan age in such works as *Horae Lyricae* (1706), and *Psalms of David* (1719), which were printed numerous times over the next centuries in America. Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, and other lesser writers similarly produced immensely successful adaptations of biblical texts and narratives to contemporary poetic standards. Works written in this paraphrastic

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tradition, which abandoned the attempt to preserve the taste of the biblical verse, meter, and rhyme, were consciously crafted *not* to resemble the actual language of the Bible.[4] Indeed, within this broad biblical literary culture, no genre prescribed the use of biblical language. On the contrary, what authors habitually did was strip a known biblical plot of its distinct textual dressing and re-present it in Augustan linguistic fashion. Aside from the Scriptures themselves the language of the King James Bible was absent from English biblical culture until the mid-eighteenth century.

It is surprising that an inspiring idiom such as the King James Bible's English, commonly singled out as a foundational influence on the development of the English language, has achieved its literary grace by accident, rather than design. Its distinctive antiquated language, its rhythms and cadences, meant to evoke a voice of divine wisdom and truth, were already becoming archaic in the standard English of the time it was being produced. The English used in that translation was associated with William Tyndale's (1484–1536) earlier and incomplete translation. Tyndale, the greatest of all English biblical translators and the foremost influence on the royal committee appointed by James I, used a language that was breaking down by the early seventeenth century. That language had become by then more of a metrical convenience than a spoken norm. Yet the King James Bible's translators intentionally retained the forms that were standard in Tyndale's translation because those forms had already come to signify liturgical decorum, which represented the antiquity and dignity James and his committee wished to preserve. The king's translators were specifically forbidden to depart from the language used by earlier translations. Thus the inbuilt conservatism of the translation process, reflecting the concerns of those who commissioned the new Bible, led directly—if unintentionally—to the retention of older ways of speaking in religious contexts by reproducing the English of nearly three generations earlier. The antiquated music and flow of the King James Bible sounds archaic not only to modern ears. That language was almost one hundred years older than the royal translation itself, and was already outdated and sounded conspicuous to contemporaries.[5]

A palpable characteristic of the King James Bible was its use of "thee," "thou," "thy," and "thine" where modern English would simply use "you," "your," and "yours." Similarly, verbal endings such as "-eth," which pervade the King James Bible, had already been mostly replaced with "-s," while the use of "thereof" had been replaced by the possessive pronoun "its."[6] That archaic language was the language eighteenth-century Americans encountered

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when they opened their bibles, as the King James Bible became the most influential text in the Anglophone world. It conjured up visions of the sacred while signaling American readers to shift register from a colloquial cognitive mode of everyday speech to one of liturgical interpretation.[7] It was also the language Anglophones, notably Americans after 1765, came across in scores of modern political newspaper articles, pamphlets, and books published from the mid-eighteenth century onward.

Although the adoption of biblical language for nonreligious purposes eventually became a distinct American intellectual expression, as in virtually every other cultural respect, colonial British North America followed and imitated the imperial metropole rather than led. The first known text of that kind was a published letter from Horace Walpole to Horace Mann dated July 14, 1742, thus out in the public sphere long after other biblical literary genres were well established. That early piece, titled *The First Chapter of the Book of Preferment*, contained two "lessons" that already demonstrated some of the basic contours that would distinguish that genre in the following century. Named as a quasi-biblical book, the "chapter" was divided into short numbered verses, and used the form of a biblical narrative from its beginning—"Now it came to pass in the fifteenth Year of the Reign of G—ge the king"—thus locating readers temporally according to a monarch's reign, just as in the Bible. The piece itself was a critique of corruption and distribution of places in mid-eighteenth-century English politics. According to the author's testimony, after *The Book of Preferment* was published it became "the original of a numberless quantity of the same kind, which were published upon all subjects for a year or two." Walpole's piece was published in America in at least two newspapers, in New York and Pennsylvania. Another satiric biblical piece, titled "The French Gasconade defeated, and then swept out of Germany," providing a humoristic rendition of European international politics, appeared in the *Boston Evening Post* later in 1743.[8]

The "most successful of English works" in America was published in 1744, a year that represents a turning point in the history of American biblical-style writing. *The Chronicle of the Kings of England, Written in the Manner of the Ancient Jewish Historians*, which eventually was published in America in at least seven editions during the following half-century, constituted a major step forward in the elaboration and sophistication of what was to become a vital tradition in American letters and politics. Self-proclaimed to have been written by Nathan Ben Saddi, "a priest of the Jews," and attributed to Robert

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Dodsley, the 1744 edition of *The Chronicle of the Kings* dressed British history in the recognizable biblical style, from the reign of William the Conqueror until that of Queen Elizabeth.[9] The *Chronicle* opened in a familiar biblical format: "Now it came to pass in the Year One thousand sixty and six, in the Month of September, on the eighth Day of the Month, that William of Normandy, surnamed the Bastard, landed in England, and pitched his Tent in a Field near the Town of Hastings." The language, style, and grammar were biblical, the tone ironic, and the text abundant with intentional anachronisms. The traits of a genre were established.

While pieces written in the biblical style were common in America during the 1740s and 1750s, most were reprints of English publications. They were not yet American, in content or in form. The first identifiable American piece in biblical style, produced two decades after the *Chronicle*, was *The Fall of Samuel the Squomicutiti* (1763). That first American pseudobiblical text was a satiric parody, probably composed by Samuel Hopkins or someone from his party in Rhode Island. That piece was followed in 1766 by a short tract in *The Maryland Journal* titled, characteristically, as it would turn out, *Chronicles*, whose author criticized the mismanagement and embezzlement involved in a local lottery project. Although those early-1760s pieces were still sporadic and different in significant respects from future similar texts, they nonetheless demonstrated that the biblical style was present in late colonial publications. The next significant milestone in the life of the tradition of writing in the style of antiquity was passed with the advent of the American Revolution, in the pro-American satire "The Book of America" (1766), published in multiple American reprints.[10]

The Revolution brought the tradition of writing in biblical style to the forefront of patriot polemics. Although written in England, the pro-American *The Book of America* foreshadowed in many respects the distinct genre that was soon to develop in America: its theme was historical and American (it traced English history from the Seven Years' War to the Repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766), its language and form biblical, its tone anachronistic and ironic: the notorious British tax stamps (as "a stamp it is called unto this day"), for example, were written on lambskins, the coin used in America was the Hebraic shekel, and mobs were the biblical evildoers, "sons of Belial." Nomenclature, as in all such texts of the following decades, was thoroughly biblicized: Georgians were "the Children of the land of George," Virginians were "the children of the land of the Virgin," and so forth. Even the most recognizable

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slogan of the Revolution, "no taxation without representation" was rephrased in biblical fashion: Americans demanded "that they should have their own Sanhedrim, in which they should be taxed."

The revolutionary ferment of the early 1770s, the immediate years before the commencement of hostilities, wrought further transformations in the biblically styled writings. The 1773 and 1774 editions of the *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, for example, added to the prerevolutionary editions an elaborate and reverential section describing the reign of the now deceased George II (the earlier editions had a brief entry about the then reigning monarch), as well as an entirely new chapter concerning the reigning monarch, George III, whose tenure was represented less favorably than those of the other post-1688 monarchs. It did seem to start off on the right foot: the king carried the war "against Lewis King of Gaul" to a most felicitous end, as military victories were sealed with the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which practically ended the French presence in North America. Yet with the conclusion of the Seven Years' War the king listened to his "Evil Counsellors," who asked him in biblical fashion, "if we have found favor in thine Eyes, [to] let a Decree be passed, forbidding any American to take unto himself a Wife, or buy, or sell, or write, or read . . . unless he pay unto us for each Time a Piece of Silver."[11] The reverence shown to earlier monarchs was no longer to be found as the *Chronicle* took a blunt pro-American turn.

These and similar elaborate and extensive pieces (often consisting of dozens of verses and thousands of words) were reprinted across the colonies. They consisted of an Enlightenment-era cultural product, written in a universally known and admired idiom. Rational, paced, and making minimal reference to God, they were not meant to provide providential historical explanations. Although this modern use of biblical idiom could have risen only in a society suffused with biblical language, it stood ambivalently in light of traditional pious sentiment. Surely, only a society that took its distance from biblical language, if not from the religious truths it revealed, could sustain, indeed embrace, such use of sacred language for the needs of the present. The use of biblical language for secular purposes thus underscores that the Bible in late-eighteenth-century America was no longer a self-legitimating text that affirmed itself as God's Word. Although probably none of the writers of texts in the biblical style intended to defame or detract from the Bible, that humans allowed themselves to write such texts reveals the degree to which the Bible had become a "document" open to criticism and scholarship.[12] While biblical authority was reassigned to the world of human beings during the Revolu-

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tion, the pseudobiblical genre illuminates the permissibility of the intellectual environment in which those texts were written.

One way to understand the extensive use of biblical form to convey modern political messages would be to emphasize the irony stemming from the frisson gained through invoking language still seen as quasi-sacred to describe contemporary reality. Indeed, beyond the mere boldness of using the biblical style for earthly purposes, some of the pseudobiblical texts capitalized on the dissonance between form and content and functioned as outright parodies, often using the biblical style to disparage, mock, and deride political enemies. In such texts adversaries became anything from "Sons of Belial," to usurping biblical kings, and even vivid demonic "beast[s] . . . having a mouth, speaking blasphemous things, and also an head, but how many horns no one knoweth."[13] Such application of biblical language and form to the political realm was at least implicitly, and often outright, satirical.

The most popular writing in biblical style of the revolutionary era was John Leacock's (1729–1802) *The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times*, which signified the complete Americanization of the genre; that work was also the epitome of the biblical parody. Leacock, a Philadelphia silversmith and merchant, was a committed patriot from early in the imperial contest. As a Whig propagandist he attempted to advertise the colonial patriot position so that all readers would identify with the positions of middling and upper-class patriots. The immensely popular and anonymously published *First Book* consisted of six chapters and was published serially and reprinted in newspapers and later in several pamphlet editions across the colonies, from Massachusetts to South Carolina, during the fall and winter of 1774–1775. The tract, far too extensive, rich, and complex to analyze here at length, was innovative in significant ways: it was the first long and full-blown exposition of American events by an American author in biblical style, and its richness and parodic nature provided, no doubt, a remarkably amusing read for contemporaries. Characters such as the Indian chief Occunneocogeecocococacheecacheecadungo, or the British attempts to make Bostonites "bow down to the TEA CHEST, the God of the Heathen," as well as camels—a biblical vehicle—loaded with cargoes of Tobacco, the ultimate American crop, could not but have raised contemporary smiles.[14]

The First Book consisted of a Whig narrative of the political events of 1773 and 1774 in biblical style. It makes extensive use of biblical nomenclature: all in all it employs a *dramatis personae* of about one hundred, the majority of whom bear either such readily deciphered names as Mordecai the

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Benjaminite (for Benjamin Franklin) and Thomas the Gageite (Thomas Gage, the military commander of Boston), or such plain biblical names as Joshua, Ehud son of Gera, and Jedidiah the priest. Some of the names were widely used in contemporary discourse, such as Rehoboam for George III, alluding to the Hebrew monarch who was held responsible for the separation of Israel into two rival kingdoms. The imagery Leacock uses is densely biblical, too, and his idioms often Hebraic. For example, the four great beasts of Daniel's prophecy stand in *The First Book* for four hated imperial magistrates, Bute, Mansfield, Bernard, and Hutchinson, while vessels loaded with Indian tea are biblical "ships from Tarshish." Leacock also repeatedly merges ancient and modern into the kind of anachronism that characterized the stylistic tradition of pseudobiblical writing; repeating II Samuel 1:20, Leacock urges his American compatriots in the lamenting words of David the son of Jesse: "Tell it not in Gath, nor publish it in the streets of Askalon."[15]

In a laudable introductory essay to the modern edition of Leacock's *First Book* the literary historian Carla Mulford, beyond establishing Leacock's authorship, analyzes its consistently anti-British attack on tyranny, militarism, Catholicism, Puritan millennialism, and extreme thought and action of all forms. Mulford identifies as contemporary Americans many of the characters on whom biblical names are bestowed but admits that the identities of other characters are not easily established. Mulford is thus probably the only modern scholar to notice a tradition of writing in biblical style in America.[16] However, her understandable focus on Leacock's *First Book* obscures the fact that, especially elaborate as it was, it was only one among scores of similar texts. Indeed, biblical-style writing neither peaked nor culminated with Leacock's *First Book*; that tradition thrived and evolved for at least half a century after the Revolution.

Still, Leacock's *First Book* was exceptional in significant ways: its length and complexity were unusual, and it featured comic moments few other texts could, or wished to, boast. With the urgent need to create a usable past in the wake of the Revolution, numerous pseudobiblical texts did not present themselves as parodies, at least no more than the Bible itself. We moderns, much less immersed in the Bible than were early Americans, need to be reminded of the extent to which the Bible has its vehemently acerbic instances of irony and contempt, particularly toward wrongdoers. Americans did not inject the Bible with sarcasm, irony, and satire it was devoid of but framed their political views within a biblical outlook that could accommodate their vitriolic and Manichean political culture.[17] Too much emphasis on the degradation

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and impiety present in the pseudobiblical language might distort and obscure some of the significant cultural meaning that that language implied.

Although the liberal use of biblical language changed the meaning and stature of that language, it did not reflect a straightforward process of secularization, seen as an unambiguous transformation from a pious to a skeptical society, as might be inferred from seeing satire as the sole thrust behind such use. Religion, historians have recently noted, was reconstructed and remade in the early modern period, not undone; presenting a strict dichotomy between the Bible and its traditional uses and the profane application of its language to politics could be misleading.[18] More nuanced processes implying change in religious attitudes, not their demolition, better describe the uses of the biblical language for American ends.

Many postrevolutionary texts adopted a somber tone rarely attempted to crack a biblical joke at a rival's expense, and thus reflect novel pseudobiblical sensibilities. Such seriousness caused contemporaries to depict their political enemies in biblical fashion as "men who had not the fear of God before their eyes," implying that in the writers' own eyes, they themselves, who used the Bible's language for secular purposes, were pious. Significantly, others wished to strengthen Americans' attachment to the Bible by applying the language of the King James Version to describe American history and politics. Gilbert Hunt, the author of one of the most elaborate and protracted texts in the pseudobiblical tradition, stated that he "adopted for the model of his style the phraseology of the best of books," namely the Bible, so that it would induce "the young pupil . . . to study Holy Scriptures."[19] Biblical renditions of American history could thus be seen as constituting a method for drawing young Americans back into the Scripture's sway. That contemporaries did not think that the use of sacred language for earthly ends necessarily degraded or secularized that language demonstrates that such language did not (necessarily) lead to the abandonment of religion. Rather, such use incorporated the political into the religious, and brought the latter more intimately and through new modes into the lives of contemporaries.

"Chapter 37th," published in Boston in 1782, represents the staid, counterparodic end of the spectrum of the pseudobiblical texts. The author of the "Chapter" established the setting in the first verse—"And it came to pass in the reign of George the king, who ruled over Albion, and whose empire extended to the uttermost parts of the earth"—then versified the history of the Revolution in a no-nonsense biblical fashion. The "Chapter" concluded

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with an American hero singing in biblical fashion, "the song of triumph, saying others have slain their thousands, but I have slain my ten thousands." This and similar texts depicted America, implicitly or explicitly, as a latter-day Israel, a chosen nation in the most earnest terms. The Bible, through the distinct usage of its language, forms, and style, no longer informed early Americans merely of the ancient history of a bygone Israelite society; nor was it solely a typological text that signified, foresaw, and corresponded to the happenings of American society. Through pseudobiblicism the Bible became a living text, an ongoing scriptural venture which complemented and fortified notions of national chosenness and mission. This transformation occurred within a poisoned political culture which created "two parallel imagined communities," namely the two political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans, that denied each other's legitimacy. This disposition, already manifested in the late 1780s, created a political culture governed by a grammar of combat, which entailed a "politics of anxious extremes."[20] It fostered the intense employment and further construction of biblical politics, each side depicting the other as wrongdoing "Adamites" or "Jeffersonites." However, beyond its partisan nature, pseudobiblicism further constructed the United States as a biblical nation. The language of the King James Bible wove the Bible into American life and sanctified the young nation. American politics were transformed, in texts largely devoid of references to God, into the new religion of the republic.

After the Revolution, Americans continued to publish faux-biblical texts at such a rate that attempts to assess them all are futile and pointless. Nevertheless, the pinnacle in the history of the tradition of writing in biblical style, particularly in the earnest and nonsatiric depictions of America as a latter-day Israel, was reached in 1793, with the publication of Richard Snowden's (1753–1825) *The American Revolution; Written in the Style of Ancient History*. Snowden's history must have touched an intellectual nerve in fin de siècle America. The history, which occupied two protracted volumes, was also published serially as dozens of chapters appearing in newspapers throughout 1794–1795 from Vermont in the north to South Carolina in the south. Additionally, Snowden's history would spawn decades after its publication at least one intellectual sequel in the form of a similarly biblicized full-scale history of the War of 1812. Popularity aside, there was nothing especially innovative either in Snowden's style and use of language, or in his retelling a history rather than commenting on current events.[21] His history is important in its being the first full-blown, thorough, earnest, and mature attempt to biblicize

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the United States and its historical record. Its reverence for America's revolutionary past was wholly sentimental and Whiggish. In other words, it was a distinctly novel American cultural production.

As in the vast majority of writings in biblical style, Snowden did not provide his readers with a history of the Revolution driven by divine intervention in which Providence played a central role. The fact that Snowden wrote "in the style of ancient history," which could have easily meant classical, not biblical, history, indicates that he emphasized the historical aspect of the biblical narrative. Indeed, God is virtually absent from Snowden's history, a curious fact if only because many other contemporary American historians of the Revolution—who were not committed to biblical style—could assign Providence a more significant role than Snowden did. According to the genre's conventions, throughout the history's volumes Snowden used relatively short and numbered verses. As in the other texts belonging to this tradition, the versed staccato was hardly the entire antique array. Snowden employed archaic English throughout, everywhere using constructions such as "spake" and "thou." He antiquated his vocabulary, nouns, and narrative style, as well as the American nomenclature. For example, throughout his history Snowden replaced modern cities' and nations' names with ancient equivalents. Hence London became Lud (an ancient Hebrew city), while Ireland was alluded to by its Latin name, "Hibernia." Even when the author preserved a nonbiblical name, he attempted to provide it with an antique flavor, for instance, "that ancient river, the river Rhine." Following the example of earlier texts in the biblical style, Snowden particularly antiquicized American names. The town of Concord became "Concordia," Virginia "the state of the Virgin," and America the "Land of Columbia." These and numerous other names, used consistently throughout Snowden's protracted narrative, biblicized the mental geography and imagined landscape of the American Revolution. As in the Bible, and contrary to modern identification which relied mostly on family names, the author identified historical actors almost solely by their first names. He reviewed, for example the names of the Continental Army's commanders (whom he called "captains," as in biblical-era armies, not generals as in modern forces): "And the names of the captains [of the Continental Army] were these, Artemas, Charles, Philip, Israel, Horatio, Seth, Richard, David, William, Joseph, John . . . ," referring to generals Ward, Schuyler, Putnam, Gates, and so on. In the absence of family names, Snowden frequently had to revert to footnotes to clarify to whom exactly he was referring, demonstrating once more that biblical style and simplicity

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were frequently not compatible. In line with the tradition within which he wrote, Snowden biblicized institutions: Congress (as in numerous other texts) became "the great Sanhedrin"; smallpox was "the leprosy of uncleanness," alluding to the Bible's most cursed ailment; and rum was "the strong water of Barbados." Snowden made extensive use of Hebraic idioms and figural language. Thus Lord North's counsel was "as the counsel of Achitophel in the days of David king of Israel," Achitophel having been the king's adviser who counseled him against his own interest; American courtiers, "like the locusts of Egypt, . . . devoured every goodly thing."[22]

Like other writers in the pseudobiblical style, Snowden often concluded chapters in the repeatedly used words and format of the biblical canon (favored also by other texts in the tradition of writing in ancient style): "And the rest of the acts of Dunmore, and all that he did . . . are they not written in the book of Ramsay the scribe?" Here David Ramsay, arguably the most contemporarily recognized of the revolution's historians, was himself portrayed as a biblical chronicler. Similarly, Snowden could conclude an episode: "And the rest of the Acts of the people of the [American] provinces, [and] how they warred . . . are they not written in the Second Book of the Chronicles of the wars of the king of Britain with the people of the provinces; and recorded by the Scribe of Columbia, in the books of the great Sanhedrim?"[23] This quotation, typical of Snowden's style, demonstrates the extent to which pseudobiblicism enabled Americans to merge and sanctify the political realm, in Snowden's case that of the American Revolution, through the use of historical anachronisms (a modern revolution "written in the Second Book of Chronicles"), and of ancient signifiers (an American "great Sanhedrim" and a historian filling the role of a "Scribe of Columbia").

To complete the ancient vision Snowden articulated, he wrote as if he himself were actually addressing an ancient audience, devoid of knowledge of things modern. Since Snowden had committed himself to an ancient fantasy, like other writers in biblical style he found it necessary to reconcile eighteenth-century devices with a biblical-style narrative. Hence he repeatedly describes British warships as "armed with engines," meaning guns, "as were not known in the days of old: fire and balls issued out of their mouths. . . . They were inventions of Satan." Continuing to be amazed by inventions already hundreds of years old by the late eighteenth century, Snowden describes gunpowder as "black dust which they put into their engines. . . . Without it the engines could do nothing." To complete the estrangement from the present Snowden refers to "those days" when alluding to the Revolution,

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as if he were actually discussing a distant and fundamentally altered reality. The list of Snowden's stylistic measures, as in numerous other texts written in biblical style, is too elaborate to treat exhaustively. But the picture is clear: Americans, by the closing decade of the eighteenth century, could describe their experiences past and present as if they were occurring in a world of biblical heroes and villains, governed by a Manichean cosmology in which the division between good and bad was clear. Snowden, who as we shall now see had a patriotic-didactic objective in mind while writing his history, constructed the United States as a chosen nation, a second Israel. Federal-era America never seemed so biblical.

Snowden was among the few authors who reflected on their choice of biblical style, pointing out that his patriotic history targeted schoolchildren as its intended audience. "The style of ancient history was chosen," for narrating the Revolution, Snowden confessed, "both for its conciseness and simplicity, and therefore the most suitable to the capacities of young people." Snowden trusted that his young readership would decipher his pseudobiblical text because early Americans were conditioned from young age to reading biblical English. As historians of early American education noted, the Bible was a principal text for teaching reading and writing in eighteen-century schools, and was still the common reading book in early-nineteenth-century schools. There is reason to doubt, however, whether readers, especially the young, grasped Snowden's history as effortlessly as the author would have liked. Short biblical-style verses did tend to focus on action rather than on the psychology of heroes, and thus enabled Snowden to condense complex plots. However, the author's frequent use of notes to explain numerous cumbersome biblical descriptions of American objects, people, and events testifies that his biblicizing necessitated clarification. The fact that young eighteenth-century readers were commonly presented with the actual biblical stories stripped from their distinct language in order to "familiarize tender age," or were rendered as biblical dramas "intended for young persons" in contemporary language attests that biblical language was commonly *not* perceived as the most simple of communication forms. Indeed, one of the most popular contemporary biblical texts for the young was *The Holy Bible Abridged*, intended to "give children such a taste of the writings of the holy penmen" in ordinary prose.[24] Evidently, for the sake of "simplicity," if not "conciseness," young readers occasionally needed biblical language simplified, not American history biblicized. Snowden's extensive history written in biblical idiom must have built then, at least in part, not on readers' training in biblical

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English but rather on the conditioning of American audiences in reading American texts written in biblical idiom.

Although the pseudobiblical style was Americanized even before the Revolution ended, there is no escaping the fact that the predominant narrative style through which Americans chose to understand and communicate the nation's founding era originated in Britain, employed Elizabethan-age English, and was associated with a British monarch, James I. This collective choice had several causes. One was the cultural supremacy in America of the King James Version, which was not responsive to political changes; another was the lack of real alternatives, since American translations of the Bible were to emerge only in the Jacksonian era. The choice also underscores the extent to which the Revolution was, in the words of the eminent historian Jack Greene, a "settler rebellion," a rather conservative affair that could not untie many of the existing cultural bonds.[25] Only when the democratic impulses of the antebellum era were unleashed did novel American idioms replace the pseudobiblical style. In the intervening generations until then, the King James Bible's language continued to occupy Americans' mental spaces.

The tradition of writing in biblical style continued to flourish in the partisan battles of the early republic. Remnants of Anti-Federalism and manifestations of early Jeffersonian Republicanism surfaced soon after the federal government began to operate, and partisans accused the members of the constitutional convention and "[John] Adams their Servant" of conspiring with "the Britannites" to the effect that "all the country round about, even from Dan unto Beersheba, should be subject unto one king, and unto one council." Republicans commonly critiqued Adams's neutrality to the French Revolution (before it deteriorated into a bloodbath) in biblical-style writings, typically depicting Republicans as "Israel," while Federalists were represented as a spectrum of biblical evildoers, from Pharisees to Amalekites. Federalists, by contrast, attacked Republicans for what they interpreted as their anarchic tendencies and Gallic leanings—or, in biblical language, for not being "a goodly people-fearing the lord and submitting to the Rulers placed over them."[26] In the following decades each side continued to endure biblical representations by its political enemies, who saw their rivals as conspiring to subvert the people's will. As relations with Britain worsened, eventually culminating in the War of 1812, a further deluge of biblical stylized texts flooded the printed sphere.

The most impressive text among the many published during the opening decades of the nineteenth century, particularly those related to the War

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of 1812, was *The History of the Late War* (1819), by Gilbert J. Hunt of New York. The only work comparable to Hunt's history up to that point in its elaboration and richness was Snowden's history (and to some extent Leacock's revolutionary-era *Book of Chronicles*). As in Snowden's case, a contemporary commentator pointed out that "the simplicity of the scriptural style" of Hunt's history, "and the short verses or sentences are calculated to make an impression on the memory more than a regular narrative, told in the usual manner." Probably in a conscious attempt to imitate Snowden's composition and success, Hunt's printers proposed to "consider it a valuable book for schools . . . calculated to give a knowledge of events to youths." The history itself was, again like Snowden's, patriotic and Whiggish in its historical interpretation. Like Snowden's history, as well as numerous earlier works, Hunt's history was nationalistic and humorless, avoiding any attempt at satire or parody. The *History* further made use of the full range of the possibilities that the style of antiquity had demonstrated and developed during many decades by biblicizing American annals. From addressing the "American Sanhedrim" to referring to modern inventions such as cannons as "battering rams" who "cast forth bombs . . . weapons of destruction, which were not known in the days of Jehoshaphat," Hunt rendered the epitome of a biblical American history.[27]

American writers chose to make use of distinctive Elizabethan English for political ends because that language manipulated readers into conjuring up biblical visions only to contrast them with their American past and present. However, we should see the uncanny portrayals of America in biblical language as going beyond authors' immediate intent, namely in the wider context of the young nation's attempts to come to terms with history and historical time. Even before independence, but especially after the creation of the United States, Americans began imagining themselves as reenacting Roman annals and re-creating a Rome-like republic of virtue, as returning to the democratic simplicity of Anglo-Saxon freedom, or, alternatively, as latter-day Israelites led by a Washingtonian Moses to inherit the American Promised Land. These historical discourses underscore the tensions which the American nation and its embryonic nationalism experienced with regard to their past (or lack thereof) and their place in history.[28] These tensions are particularly illustrated through the use of the pseudobiblical style, which compelled Americans to articulate their history and present as if they occurred in a biblical world.

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These pseudobiblical texts reflect a distinct historical consciousness, very different from common twenty-first-century historical temporal sensibilities. Tracts like the grand histories in biblical style by Snowden and Hunt, but also numerous other shorter texts, consisted of radical historical statements. By imposing the Bible and its intellectual and cultural landscapes on America, those texts placed the United States in a biblical time frame, describing the new nation and its history as occurring in a distant, revered, and mythic dimension. These texts thus produced a constructive estrangement, rendering the present through biblical forms and structures, which while well known and respected, were linguistically and temporally dissonant. By manipulating time and space, pseudobiblicism proved an effective medium for buttressing notions of chosenness and mission. The countless verses opening with the biblio-temporal statement "And it came to pass" located readers in biblical time, while nomenclature and geography functioned similarly, by turning, for example, Federalists into "Federalites" and New Yorkers into "Manhattanites," and repeatedly sanctifying the expanse of America, describing the United States in Canaanite terms as stretching "from Dan even unto Beersheba." Biblical narratives and modes of action further blended in partisan texts that battled over the legacy of the Revolution. Each party saw the other as sinning Israelites (or gentiles), describing their rivals as "gather[ing] themselves together," wishing for "more honor and reverence showed onto us under a king." This republicanization of the Bible, evinced in repeated biblical representations of America, reorganized Americans' space of experiences, and expanded their horizon of national expectations. By rendering biblical history as immanently relevant to America and constructing their experiences as a reenactment of a biblical script, contemporaries stretched conventional understandings of time and history. Through such temporal modes Americans, representing their nation as led by "George [Washington, who] reigned over all Israel . . . execut[ing] judgment and justice among all his people," made sense of understanding the United States as a latter-day biblical society.[29] The rest of the acts of the young United States, to use the parlance of the day, were they not written in the cadences of the King James Version, as a chapter of a biblical history that unfolded regularly in American prints?

If notions of America as second Israel were still tentative at the commencement of the Revolution, by the nineteenth century they were inseparable from the political discourse that would soon spawn Manifest Destiny. Narrating America through a quasi-sacred language deeply associated with ancient Israel conditioned contemporaries to think of an American mission

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in biblical terms. Americans who saw fit to draw on the most sacred of idioms to describe their past and present perpetuated and intensified the discourse of America as a chosen nation; unsurprisingly, many of the texts written in biblical language referred explicitly to America as "Israel" (and hence of their rivals as helplessly degenerate gentiles). By alluding to the past of God's chosen people through the use of the distinctive language in which that history was originally articulated, Americans attempted not to alter the received facts of that revered history but rather to invoke the authority and meaning which that history exerted and apply it to their present. The use of biblical language was thus not (only) a way to make the Bible relevant to America; it was an effective way to make America relevant to the Bible, to biblicize America.

The fact that the language of the King James Bible was applied abundantly and consistently in texts narrating American accounts and histories, a genre which I have dubbed pseudobiblicism, further demonstrates not merely the extent to which American culture was biblically oriented, but that that biblicism was profoundly focused on the Old Testament. This strong predilection for the Old rather than the New Testament is evident when one surveys extant pseudobiblical texts, a sizable corpus written during more than a century (circa 1740–1850); while each of those texts echoes and resonates with Old Testament narratives and protagonists, it is hard to find even a single reference to Christ, not to mention other New Testament characters or episodes.

The mobilization of the Old Testament for political ends reflects, and may be attributed to, the political nature of the Hebrew Bible, as well as to the inaptness of the New Testament for explicitly political purposes. But Americans' recourse to the Hebrew Scriptures also demonstrates their eagerness to understand themselves as latter-day Israelites. In the process, while never denying the historicity of the original, ancient, and biblical Israel, they subordinated that history, as well as the unique language through which it was conveyed, to their national mission. It is thus fair to say that the robustness of pseudobiblicism—the mobilization of the narratives and literary arsenal of the Authorized Version's Old Testament in public discourse—points to remarkable levels of biblical fluency in the general population (or at least among the vast and ever expanding community of early American newspaper readers); otherwise such language would have been ineffective as a mode of political communication—indeed, unintelligible altogether. The many writers and newspaper editors in the early republic who published the numerous "Chronicles" and "Chapters" knew what Perry Miller reminded us

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of long ago, namely that the Old Testament was truly omnipresent in early America, and that Old Testament narratives and images had become, in the words of Mark Noll, "the common coinage for the realm."[30] By elaborating the meaning of their national community and its role in history through pseudobiblicism, Americans of the early republic—a Christian people if there ever was one—certainly earned their reputation as a biblical nation.

It would be excessive to list the numerous "Chronicles," "Chapters," and manifold other pieces written in ancient style constantly appearing in newspapers. Many were published in the years and decades following the War of 1812, some comic, others sentimental, some discussing local issues, others questions of national concern, some brief and others long-winded. Those texts kept circulating and were printed and reprinted across the nation. One cannot escape the feeling, however, that after the 1820s, a point in time when "a shift from Old Testament to New Testament dominance" may have been noticeable in the United States, the almost century-old genre of public writing in the style of antiquity had begun to lose its vigor. Certainly impressive texts were still written after that date in antique style, such as the quasi-biblical tracts addressed to the Bank Wars of the 1830s. Even during the 1840s texts like the elaborate *Chapter from the Whig Chronicles* provided an extended Democratic survey of the history of American Federalists-turned-Whigs from the Revolution to Henry Clay, concluding with the biblical form so popular among writers in the genre: "Now the rest of the acts of the Whigs, and the many wicked things which they did, and the sore defeats with which they were discomfited, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the Whigs of the North Country . . . ?" In the years after 1830, however, pieces written in the style of antiquity become notably sparse and sporadic; after 1850 there were hardly any to be found.[31]

Although changes in aesthetic preferences and cultural tastes are hard to pinpoint, clearly something significant occurred in the relationship between the American people and biblical language after the 1820s. Parallel changes are visible in other cultural realms, such as the decline of republican (and aristocratic) Rome as a model in public discourse, and its replacement by democratic Athens in the Jacksonian era. Significantly, calls to reform the King James Bible's anachronistic language were first heard in America in the same years.[32] As the United States emerged as a modern, commercial, industrial mass democracy during the first decades of the nineteenth century, its earlier genteel and enlightened ethos was quickly fading. Although monocausal explanations hardly serve for transformations in cultural tastes and intellectual

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sensibilities, it would not be far-fetched to speculate that the slow but steady decline in the pseudobiblical style was due to powerful cultural currents at work in the United States by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Dominant among those forces was the surging democratic populism of the Jacksonian era.

The cultural ethos of the founding era was neoclassical, one that valued formal, refined, and enlightened language and had deep contempt for democracy. Accordingly, eighteenth-century language separated the realms of the refined and the vulgar, the few and the many: the neoclassical and genteel rhetoric implied a social order in which those who ruled were eloquent while those who did not were crude and pitiful. The archaic and arcane language of the biblical style complemented such public tastes by implying a matching ideal of social authority. But once the democratic and liberal forces of the sprawling young nation were unleashed, the move from baroque idioms such as the pseudobiblical style to a more democratic, inclusive, and unpretentious discourse was just a matter of time. Democratic language, defined in the words of the historian Kenneth Cmiel as "plain, unadorned, declarative prose," was averse to the ostentatiously authoritative and aloof biblical style. Indeed, the aggressive, masculine nineteenth-century Jacksonian plain speaking challenged neoclassical sensibilities head-on. The new currents that encouraged informal speech, slang dialect, and familiarity all contributed to a linguistic egalitarianism which the ornate pseudobiblical writing could not accommodate. The genteel sensibilities that the biblical style catered to and elaborated were deemed "polite" and "corrupt" in the age of manly democracy. Among the other transformations in American society during the market revolution and the Jacksonian era, it became much less tolerant toward "aristocratic" manifestations in general, refined modes of expression in particular. The authoritativeness, rationality, balance, and aloofness of the biblical style, characteristics at least partially responsible for its eighteenth-century success, facilitated its eventual fall from grace in an age of antebellum romanticism and popular democracy.[33]

The reformed Protestant heritage, a neoclassical political culture, and a mature culture of print facilitated the rise of this unique mode of representing contemporary American culture. The tradition of writing "in the style of antiquity," the product of an age still suffused with the Bible yet already Enlightened as to the liberal use of that book's language, offers a vantage point for better understanding a lost political, cultural, and intellectual early American world of biblical imagination. The appeal to biblical language

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helped to make sense of a fast-changing world and of novel American democratic ways. The extensive use of that idiom demonstrates how, by invoking a privileged language, Americans imagined and reclaimed social and political power in a world that experienced the diminishing influence of traditional sources of authority in the decades following the creation of the republic.[34] Although the use of the Bible's language for nonreligious ends would not have been possible before the eighteenth century, when novel attitudes eased restraints for applying Scripture to nonreligious arenas, it would be wrong to see the flourishing of pseudobiblical writing as part of a straightforward process of secularization in America: the story of its use is the story not of diminishing religious sentiment but of a transformation and reconstruction of beliefs and understandings of America's meaning and collective identity.

The usefulness of a refined language such as Elizabethan English diminished once the United States embraced the ethos of popular democracy. It became evident that the formal biblical language belonged more to the eighteenth century than to antebellum America, and more to an age of genteel politics of prudent gentlemen than to the public discourse of democracy and evangelicalism. Only a text in biblical style that adapted to and embodied the deep cultural transformations of the Jacksonian era could thrive in a world of democratic coarseness, of mass revivals, and of relentless industrialization. The tradition of writing in biblical style paved the way for the Book of Mormon by conditioning Americans to reading American texts, and texts about America, in biblical language. Yet the Book of Mormon, an American narrative told in the English of the King James Bible, has thrived long after Americans abandoned the practice of recounting their affairs in biblical language. It has been able to survive and flourish for almost two centuries not because, but in spite of, the literary ecology of the mid-nineteenth century and after.[35] The Book of Mormon became a testament to a widespread cultural practice of writing in biblical English that could not accommodate to the monumental transformations America endured in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Gordon Wood speculated decades ago that if the book of Mormon had been published later than its original appearance in 1830, it would have been inconceivable for Mormonism to take hold, since "a generation or so later it might have been necessary for Smith and his followers to get some university professors to authenticate the characters on the golden plates." Nevertheless,

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Smith's timing was providential for yet another reason: the Book of Mormon was published during the final efflorescence of a tradition of pseudobiblical writing in the United States. Published later, the Book of Mormon might not have benefited from Americans' fascination with pseudobiblicism, which gradually lost its appeal in the years after 1830. By the time the effects of this decline were felt, however, the Book of Mormon had gained a momentum of its own, transcending the literary tradition which helped pave the way for that original American scripture.[36] Hence a closer look at the Book of Mormon in light of the popular—and hitherto disregarded—genre of American texts posing as biblical writings will help to contextualize and better understand Joseph Smith's bible in the intellectual culture of the early republic. Understating the Book of Mormon in relation to a well-established pseudobiblical culture might thus shed new light on perennial questions regarding the contentious history of the Mormon bible and thus offer a fresh understanding of the intellectual and cultural, as well as religious, history of the early United States.

When Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830, Americans had been producing and consuming faux-biblical texts for close to a century. As we have seen, American colonials, who first merely reissued English pieces, imitating a practice that had originated as a satirical literary genre in the first half of the eighteenth century in Britain, started publishing original pseudobiblical texts in earnest during the Revolution. Thereafter Americans regularly described and were informed of their political realities through texts that featured the full range of the literary conventions of the Authorized King James Version.

In the years leading to the publication of the Book of Mormon, American citizens thus became accustomed to perceiving their recent history in biblical terms, not only in the Bible's distinct language but also in its deep meaning. Pseudobiblical texts habituated contemporaries' historical and biblical sensibilities to understand the Bible and America in similar terms, hence to perceive the United States as a biblical nation. As we shall soon see, the pseudobiblical texts may have helped pave the way to the creation and reception of an American scripture in the cadences and metaphors of the King James Bible. In light of the popular genre of American pseudobiblicism, at least some of the Book of Mormon's accounts—for example, of the Jewish ancestors of the American Indians and their remarkable history in the New World—may seem less extraordinary.[37] The details of the pseudobiblical texts that preceded (and anteceded) the Book of Mormon may have been

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radically different from the centuries-long history of a family of Jews and their vast progeny in America, as portrayed in the Mormon Bible. But such texts and the Mormon Bible matched and enhanced each other remarkably.

The Book of Mormon, "One of the greatest documents in American cultural history," according to one historian, which, according to another, "occupies a position of major importance in both the religious and intellectual history of the United States," differed, to be sure, in crucial respects from other contemporary texts written in pseudobiblical style. Although its contemporary critics already argued that they could identify in it the fingerprints of nineteenth-century American culture, as a prophetic text it pointedly steered clear of the blunt polemics that characterized many of the political pseudobiblical texts. Moreover, Providence, unlike in those pseudobiblical pieces in which men were the main, if not the sole, historical agents, was omnipresent in the Book of Mormon. Like other contemporary visionary tracts—none of which made use of the Bible's language—the Book of Mormon proclaimed itself a revelatory text intended to tell authentic religious truths, an attempt that even the most ambitious texts written in pseudobiblical style would not make.[38]

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to see the Book of Mormon as intimately connected to the wider genre of pseudobiblicism: the unique combination of the biblical form and style that the Book of Mormon shares with the pseudobiblical texts, as well as their distinctly American content, provide a case for seeing Smith's book as meaningfully affiliated to that American mode of writing. This affiliation is particularly significant once we realize that while few if any other contemporary visionaries claimed the sacred authority of the biblical language, Smith was bold enough to publish his American bible in the sacred idiom.[39] Understanding the Book of Mormon in light of the pseudobiblical tradition may thus shed new light on its origins and conception (or translation, according to Mormon belief), as well as on the context in which it emerged, was received, and proliferated.

While the practice of imitating the biblical style to convey reality appears extraordinary to modern readers, it came naturally to generations of Americans writing and reading pseudobiblical texts, Joseph Smith and his audience included. The numerous texts written in biblical idiom, some of which were, as we have just seen, major and hugely popular literary productions, attest to the vigor of that distinct American tradition. What first strikes the occasional reader of the Book of Mormon is its biblical language, "laced with biblical ex-

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pressions . . . steeped in the words and rhythms of the Authorized Version." Historians of Mormonism are well aware of this, pointing out that Smith "was telling a sacred story, and this demanded a sacred language, which for him meant the English of the King James Bible." Throughout the book the reader hears the intonations of the diction of King James's translators in numerous sentences, such as a random verse from the first chapter of the Mormon canon: "For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah . . . and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed." If a sympathetic reader may believe that the Book of Mormon "thinks like the Bible," others concluded that it must have seemed to contemporaries "a clumsy parody of the King James Bible. Every verb ended in–*eth*, and every other sentence began, 'And it came to pass.'" Indeed, the "Gold Bible" (thus named after the golden plates upon which it was reportedly originally carved) would have been incomprehensible to contemporaries except in a biblical context, since for them the language it utilized was "the only appropriate language in which to enfold the holy words of Scripture." Like the Bible itself and the imitative pseudobiblical writings, the Book of Mormon was printed as a collection of books, holding Bible-sounding titles such as "The Book of Jacob," or "The Book of Mosiah," and divided into numbered chapters. Like the Bible itself, the Book of Mormon was not composed as verses, but was so arranged only later for convenience and conformity. Many of the pseudobiblical texts were divided into numbered verses, but others were not.[40]

Terryl Givens has noted in an illuminating study that reference to, and interpretation of, specific passages of the Book of Mormon were "surprisingly uncommon" in the early days of the Church. This, according to Givens, is because "the Book of Mormon's place in Mormonism and American religion generally has always been more connected to its status as *signifier* than *signified*, or its role as a sacred sign rather than its function as persuasive theology."[41] The Book's influence thus owed less to what it said than to what it consisted of; it was first and foremost a historical account of events that took place in America written in biblical language. Accordingly, the way in which the Book presents itself, through both its biblical language and its American subject matter, gains further importance: from the opening paragraphs of Nephi I (the first book of the Mormon bible) it is obvious not only that the Book of Mormon is written in the King James Bible's idiom but also that it is an *American* book in the most literal sense, recounting a narrative in which

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the New World is the promised land upon which its original inhabitants, the descendants of the people of Israel, enacted dramatic and sacred acts. Like many other contemporary texts written in the biblical style, the Book of Mormon makes use of the archaic language to historicize and sanctify American annals, interweaving the Bible and America, America and the Bible.

Without detracting from its innovations and distinctiveness, there is a strong case for viewing the Book of Mormon in light of a larger contemporary textual world, and as part of a long American tradition of comparable texts written in biblical language. While the book's affinities to the original biblical testaments, as well as to early-nineteenth-century prophetic culture, have been well established, its affiliation to the genre of writing in biblical prose still needs to be demonstrated. True, like other writings in that tradition, the Book of Mormon co-opts the American landscape and its (pre)history by incorporating it into a scriptural cosmos. While earlier writings in the style of antiquity tend to hallow the terms in which the United States' history and its present were perceived, the Book of Mormon introduces America's remote past into the biblical canon. The Book of Mormon may be seen as "an extension of the old and new testaments to the Western Hemisphere," but so also may the numerous pseudobiblical texts. Seen in this light, the Book of Mormon thus did not necessarily offer American readers a unique, "wholly fresh, wholly novel, and . . . wholly innocent new Scripture."[42] Rather, in light of American pseudobiblicism, the Book of Mormon may be seen as extending prevalent literary conventions to their logical conclusion: like numerous texts in the pseudobiblical style, the Book of Mormon incorporated the Bible into American circumstances through the use of an idiom well known to Americans accustomed to texts written in a language that consecrated America and its history. It was a language through which Americans regularly revealed truths, either scriptural or political.

The generic connection between pseudobiblical writings and the Book of Mormon is further evident in the ways in which authors rendered the alleged origin and source of their texts. The Book of Mormon, like earlier pseudobiblical works, announced itself as a translation of an ancient source. Similarly, "The First Book of Chronicles, Chapter the 5th," a typical pseudobiblical text that was published in South Carolina's *Investigator* a few years before the Book of Mormon, characteristically proclaimed that it was "translated from the original Hebrew, by Rabbi Shaloma Ben Ezra, for the consolation of posterity." However, the Hebrew of the Old Testament was not necessarily what early-nineteenth-century Americans meant as the linguistic source of their

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pseudobiblical texts. Such writings could refer to themselves, for example, merely as "translated from the original," without naming Hebrew as the specific language of that "original."[43]

Beyond presenting themselves as translated from an ancient language, the pseudobiblical texts also shared with the Book of Mormon the remarkable narratives of the ways in which they had survived for ages and were eventually miraculously discovered. Such a text could fashion itself as "A Fragment of the Prophecy of Tobias," a Hellenized Hebrew name that did not refer to a specific biblical prophet (although the name Tobias, or, in the Hebrew original, Toviah, appears several times in the Bible), or merely as a "fragment [which] was found by the subscriber." The Book of Mormon should thus be seen in the context of contemporary texts written in biblical idiom which presented themselves as ancient, often Hebraic, in origin, mysteriously recovered, and translated from an exotic language for presentation before an American audience.[44]

Some of the recovery stories that pseudobiblical writings told are strikingly similar to the account of the Book of Mormon. The story about the golden plates is well known: buried of yore on rural New York's Mount Cumorah near the Smith family's farm in Palmyra, they waited for ages to be found and translated by Joseph Smith, Jr. Less known is *The Fifteenth Chapter of the Chronicles* (1812), a rather conventional pseudobiblical text published in New York's *Broome County Patriot* years before Smith made public his account of the golden plates in the not too distant Palmyra. *The Fifteenth Chapter of the Chronicles* described a supposedly ancient manuscript whose excavator, "Ben Saidi," appealed to the newspaper's editor to present his extraordinary find to the paper's readers. The choice of Ben Saidi as a pseudonym (or a pseudofinder's name) clearly alluded to Nathan Ben Saddi, the nom de plume that the English author Robert Dodsley chose for his popular mid-eighteenth-century pseudobiblical *Chronicle of the Kings of England*. However, while the English Ben Saddi had stated a century earlier that he was the *Chronicle*'s author, not mere translator, the early-nineteenth-century American Ben Saidi claimed a different provenance for his biblical text. Ben Saidi's "ancient" manuscript was "found in the hollow of a tree, where it has probably been deposited for ages." He turned to the New York editor: "If you are able to decipher it"—for ancient prophetic texts, Mormon or other, required decoding and translation—"you will oblige me by giving it a place in your paper." Ben Saidi (and Joseph Smith), like other authors of "fragments" and "Ancient Chronicles" which necessitated translation from ancient languages, took

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part in the contemporary frenetic treasure hunting and digging culture that flourished in the burned-over district. They were fascinated by ancient and puzzling American scriptural texts, written in biblical idiom, hidden for centuries in the western areas of the Empire State, awaiting their early-republic excavators to find and translate them. The line separating political polemics and earnest claims to authenticity, between a pseudobiblical language and a language of prophetic religiosity, was never thinner.[45]

Contemporary texts such as the Book of Mormon and American pseudobiblical writings presented themselves as translations of ancient sources, and fashioned themselves (as pseudoepigraphic texts have done throughout the ages) as mysteriously, if not miraculously, preserved. Nevertheless, the Book of Mormon, while similar to contemporary pseudobiblical texts—and preceded by millennia of pseudoepigraphy and apocrypha—in its narratives of preservation, seems less in line with its congeners in other respects. The Book of Mormon's claim, for example, to have been inscribed on the gold plates in an unknown language that Joseph Smith identified as "Reformed Egyptian" seems particularly idiosyncratic. An Egyptian genealogy for apocryphal texts, as Edwin Firmage points out, "has attracted authors of sapiential, magical, and alchemical works since Greco-Roman times but . . . seems out of place in a work of Christian apologetics."[46]

Nevertheless, even in this regard we may find cultural webs that reveal the deep and yet unnoticed connections among the era's biblical and pseudobiblical imagination, print culture, and the Book of Mormon. Hieroglyphic Bibles, a common and unnoticed genre that circulated in the early American republic, are nodes on such webs. Post-Reformation English Bibles often featured distinctive images in an attempt to clarify obscure and overdetermined sacred phrases and narratives. Such emblematic figures helped form "visible Bibles," which according to the literary historian Lori Anne Ferrell were used as mnemonic devices through visual association. "Curious" hieroglyphic Bibles were an American specimen, issued in multiple editions from the late eighteenth century through the publication of the Book of Mormon and after. The hieroglyphic Bibles took part in this visual-biblical culture by rendering the Old and New Testaments with key words and phrases in the scriptural text replaced by pictorial woodcuts. Self-proclaimed as "hieroglyphic," these Bibles, impressively executed and each containing hundreds of carefully crafted images, while supposedly intended "for the amusement of youth" were actually devices, like some key pseudobiblical texts, "to familiarize tender age" with Scripture. Like "Reformed Egyptian," the ancient lan-

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guage from which Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon, the widespread use of pictographic symbols to convey biblical narratives manifest early Americans' continuing fascination with the Bible and its relation to ancient forms of presentation. Although Smith never specifically referred to hieroglyphs in the context of Reformed Egyptian, the identification of pictographs with the ancient Egyptian script was universal; so was—and still is, since the Book of Mormon was published—the common understanding that Reformed Egyptian was a hieroglyphic form of writing.[47] Hence the connection of scripture and hieroglyphs, the Bible and ancient Egypt, and the sacred and the pictorial was not unique to Smith but an embedded aspect of contemporary biblical imagination. The Book of Mormon was thus taking the form, and making its impression on, a world attuned to the linguistic and representational sensibilities it evoked. Both the Mormon Bible's language and the original Egyptian writing system supposed by its readership resounded powerfully in the culture of the early American republic.

Attempts to understand the creation of the Book of Mormon have had mixed results over recent decades. Richard Bushman pointed out lately in his magisterial biographical study of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith that the Book of Mormon has been difficult for "historians and literary critics from outside Mormondom to comprehend." Long ago, Smith's biographer Fawn Brodie suggested that the Book of Mormon "can best be explained, not by Joseph's ignorance nor by his delusions, but by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of his time." Ever since, scholars, roughly divided into "compositionists," who attribute to Smith the book's creation, or "transcriptionists," who propose that Smith experienced a divine call and merely translated the book into English, have tried to contextualize him and his remarkable book in the intellectual and social history of the early American republic. Consequently, historians have produced a rich literature on the various contexts of the creation of the Book of Mormon, from theories of Smith's acquaintance with contemporary speculation on the Hebrew origins of Indians to structural explanations pertaining to popular culture. Summarizing many of these interpretations, the historian Nathan Hatch concluded that the Book of Mormon was created as "a synthesis which grew out of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, magic and the occult arts, and [Smith's] experience with dreams and visions."[48]

Leaving aside the impressive levels of the sophistication of current understandings of early Mormonism, the "Joseph Smith problem" still seems

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to generate unease: how could a young man, "reared in a poor Yankee farm family . . . [with] less than two years of formal schooling and . . . without social standing or institutional backing," come to produce "a second Bible"? Walter McDougall recently argued that "if the book [of Mormon] did emerge unaided from the head of this young, untutored man, he must have soaked up influences both ancient and modern like a sponge, and must have known intuitively how to refine them into . . . an extraordinary work of popular imagination." Richard Bushman, a believing Mormon, has pointed out that viewing the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith's composition (as opposed to revelation) "is at odds with the Joseph Smith of the historical record," not only because Joseph was, according to those who knew him, "an unambitious, uneducated, treasure-seek[er]," but, more important, because he "is not known to have read anything but the bible and perhaps the newspaper."[49] By including American pseudobiblicism in the intellectual inventory of the Second Great Awakening, Scripture and contemporary newspapers might possibly have been content enough to build the literary and imaginative (or religious and divine) framework for an American bible.

Palmyra's inhabitants had access to writings in the style of antiquity during the 1820s, the formative decade in the life of the young Joseph Smith. Most historians have long denied Smith the image of the ignorant rural boy who could not have acquired all the material that he would have needed to write the Book of Mormon. They have been pointing out the reading habits common to the residents of his region, their exposure to newspapers, libraries, and bookstores, the several roads that connected the towns of western New York State with one another and with eastern cities. They have further underscored that the Erie Canal passed a mere block away from Palmyra's main street, connecting the town with the Hudson River as early as 1823, and with Lake Erie by 1825. Those paths enabled eastern newspapers and books to flood the Palmyra-Manchester area. Predictably, we find pseudobiblical writings in Palmyra and its vicinity during those years, including those in a local newspaper into which, according to one of its employees, Smith "once a week . . . would stroll into the office of the old Palmyra Register, for his father's paper." We also find an abundance of biblical-style writings in the eastern areas directly on the route of the Erie Canal. By 1828, historians point out, Smith was immersed in biblical language, "whether by personal study of scripture, by listening to sermons, [or] by natural participation in the biblical idioms of family conversation." Clearly Smith's "speech and thought patterns had been profoundly influenced by the common version [the King

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James Bible]."[50] Smith found the vocabulary, idioms, and grammar that he needed to form the style of the Book of Mormon in the King James Version; he could have reinforced that biblicism and learned to apply it to new and American contexts through acquaintance with pseudobiblical writings available in contemporary printings. So if, conceivably or even probably, Joseph Smith was aware of pseudobiblicism, we can only speculate on how writings on America in biblical language would have impressed that young man and influenced his creative mind. Surely it was the Bible that exerted the most influence on Smith. However, pseudobiblicism demonstrates the ease with which writers could lapse into biblical prose when discussing and describing American events. Even without being able to attribute a direct influence of pseudobiblicism on Smith, incorporating the tradition of biblical writing into his, and the early republic's, intellectual cosmos adds a crucial dimension and context for understanding the creation—and reception—of the Book of Mormon.

Non-Mormon scholars tend, as we have seen, to historicize the Book of Mormon. However, faithful Mormons similarly conclude that the Mormon bible is the product of a human being, Joseph Smith, who left his intellectual footprints on his scriptural translation. Hence they too agree that the Book of Mormon's rendition in English represents "the ideas and basic form of the plate text in syntax, vocabulary, and idioms more appropriate to Joseph Smith's language culture than whatever language culture generated the plate text [which Smith translated to English]." Since Mormons can believe that the Book of Mormon is "given in English idiom of the period and locality in which the Prophet lived," they may too appreciate the pertinence of pseudobiblicism to their scripture.[51]

"Let the language of the Book speak for itself," Joseph Smith pleaded an impatient American audience in an apologia for his new Bible.[52] By taking Smith's advice, and juxtaposing the Book of Mormon with the tradition of writing in biblical style, we not only gain new insights into persistent historiographical questions pertaining to the Mormon bible; we also better understand the cultural environment that produced it and in which it thrived. Biblical language defined the Book of Mormon and placed it alongside contemporary pseudobiblical texts, which transported their narratives to America and constantly referred to the same biblical Ur-text for idioms, style, and structure. Detached from the context of the numerous other American writings in biblical style, Smith's scripture is indeed incomprehensible. One wonders how this affiliation influenced the Mormon bible's effectiveness and

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success: the pseudobiblical language was, after all, essentially political (and often ironic and polemic), making secular use of a sacred language. An association with this at least potentially religiously problematic language could have hampered the Book of Mormon's reception.

However, contemporaries did not deem the pseudobiblical language a form that necessarily degraded the Bible, so nor should we. Pseudobiblicism certainly revolutionized attitudes to the language of the Bible by democratizing the terms of its use. But such use did not necessarily lead to erosion of religious sentiments and sensibilities. Rather, pseudobiblicism incorporated the political into the religious, and may have deepened the hold of pious sensibilities through new epistemic modes in the lives of contemporaries. Such use of the Bible's language was also strongly associated with the quasi-religious undertaking of sanctifying America, depicting it as a chosen nation in the most staid terms. The distinct use of the biblical language, form, and style no longer merely informed early Americans of an ancient history but spawned vivid texts that referred directly to contemporaries' lives. Pseudobiblicism was an ongoing scriptural venture that complemented and fortified notions of national chosenness. By conditioning contemporaries to apply biblical language to American content, and thus to perceive their history and construct their national expectations in scriptural categories, pseudobiblical language may have helped to ameliorate readers' reactions to and digestion of the Mormon Bible.

Since Mormonism drew its followers from other Christian denominations, when Smith published his Book in 1830, potential converts were immersed in the language, narratives, metaphors, and cultural grammar of the King James Bible. But many of them must also have been familiar with the contemporary American narratives and histories presented in that universally revered language. Hence Terryl Givens's remark that Joseph Smith's linguistic and stylistic decisions attest "to a desire to build upon the aura and authority of biblicalism in order to enhance the legitimacy of his work of Christian revisionism" acquires new light.[53] The Book of Mormon's biblical language may not only have catered to audiences' need to hear prophecy in the language that was universally accepted as suitable and even necessary for divine pronouncements; it was also the textual style and mode through which his countrymen had been used to receiving and perceiving historical renditions of America for some fourscore years. Pseudobiblicism then plays an important role in understanding the reception of the Book of Mormon among its early readers, who were operating in a world that sanctioned uses of the

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Bible's language that would be culturally impermissible only a few decades later (and had been acceptable for not more than a century before). At the very least, pseudobiblicism points to the extent to which the Bible provided the people of that time with a second language, and reflects their intimacy with that idiom, an intimacy the Book of Mormon surely gained from.

That the Book of Mormon was by far the most successful revelatory text of its age, and as far as we know the only such text presenting itself as the word of God to make use of biblical language, may not have been a coincidence. By the third decade of the nineteenth century Americans were conditioned to perceive and hallow their nation through the medium of Elizabethan English. They might have not found the Mormon Bible as exceptional as a modern reader might think. Its form, style, and aspiration to sanctify America had already been circulating for more than half a century in the republic's printed sphere.

Nevertheless, assessing the assertion that pseudobiblicism had actually participated in and contributed to the reception of the Book of Mormon is a daunting, not to say futile, task. As reasonable as such a hypothesis may be, the evidence is mostly circumstantial: we have few if any direct references to the pseudobiblical language by contemporary consumers of those texts, and no direct ties connecting the Book of Mormon to pseudobiblicism. However, it may be "a dog that did not bark" that demonstrates the remarkable extent to which Americans were accustomed by 1830 through years of consuming pseudobiblicism to absorbing texts about America in biblical language. Indeed, it is astonishing that although the Book of Mormon was among the most criticized, derided, and maligned texts of its age, one is hard pressed to find even a single critical remark about the Book's salient and apparently blasphemous (in the eyes of non-Mormons) use of the language of the Bible. Remarkably, early opponents of the Book of Mormon who did note Smith's use of biblical language, as critical as they might otherwise be, did *not* criticize such use. One commentator, for example, alluding to the Book of Mormon as "full of strange narratives," remarked indifferently that it was written "in the style of the scriptures," and went on halfheartedly to applaud the Book for "bearing on its face the marks of some ingenuity, and familiar acquaintance with the Bible." Lack of concern about the use of the King James Bible's language seemed to have been the norm among its detractors. Noting that the "book is a literary curiosity," another observer noticed that "the style is an affectation of the Scriptural," and went on to criticize not the use of the language in which the Book was written but the mere fact that it was "destitute

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of the beauties of sublimity." While some critics scoffed the Mormon book as "a ridiculous imitation of the holy scriptures and in many instances, a plagiarism upon their language," others underscored that "every page [bore] the impress of its human authorship."[54] These detractors, evidently aware of the Mormon bible's use of the language Americans were so thoroughly acquainted with through centuries of reading the Authorized Version, were little concerned by the fact that the Book of Mormon used a language that was biblical and traditionally considered sacrosanct. There is little doubt that this silence was due to decades of the incessant production and consumption of American texts written in an idiom that mobilized biblical language to describe American events. The pseudobiblical tradition seemed to have numbed American sensibilities toward the mobilization of the sacred language. By 1830 Americans willingly accepted that that language could describe not only happenings in Canaan of old but also deeds occurring, or having occurred, in the new American Canaan. By acculturating Americans to texts about America written in biblical language, the pseudobiblical tradition thus helped pave the way for the Book of Mormon.

After 1830 the almost century-old genre of public writing in biblical style began to lose its vigor. While pseudobiblical texts were still written for decades after the publication of the Book of Mormon, in the years after 1830 pseudobiblicism became notably sparse and sporadic; after 1850 hardly any such texts are to be found.[55] Pseudobiblicism suggests that we may profit from viewing the Book of Mormon as taking part in that larger biblico-American world that flourished from approximately 1770 to 1830. By doing so we may better understand the literary cosmos in which the Mormon bible was written, while at the same time gaining further insights into what made that American scripture appealing or even intelligible to contemporaries. Americans, who had been reading texts akin in important aspects to Joseph Smith's bible for many years before its publication, were thus conditioned to comprehend texts written in biblical style about America. Hence the genre of pseudobiblicism demonstrates once more, if such a demonstration is needed, how pervasive, indeed omnipresent, the Bible was in the cultural landscape of the young American republic. Americans' intimacy with the Bible is underscored through their habit of effortlessly lapsing into biblical language when discussing their past and present in prolonged and articulated texts. These pseudobiblical texts reveal much about the political and historical assumptions pervading the young American republic. As I have pointed out,

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however, this relentless pseudobiblical discursive mode also sheds new light on the Book of Mormon, the context in which that American bible was formed, and the cultural ecology in which it was received.

The reformed Protestant heritage, a neoclassical political culture, and a mature culture of print facilitated the rise of a unique pseudobiblical mode of representing contemporary America. By alluding to the Israelite past, to the history of God's chosen people through the use of the language in which that history was articulated, Americans did not challenge the historicity of Scripture. Rather, they invoked its authority, subjugated the meaning which was associated with the history it told, and applied it to their present. The use of biblical language was thus an effective way to merge America and the Bible, hence to pave the way to an original American bible. The tradition of writing in this "truly American spirit" thus offers a vantage point for better understanding a lost political, cultural, and intellectual early American world of biblical imagination, a world to which Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon belonged. The unmistakable similarities and affinities between the Book of Mormon and the pseudobiblical texts thus provide a significant context for understanding the creation (or translation) and reception of the Book of Mormon, the culture of biblicism in the nineteenth century, and through that the intellectual history of the early American republic.

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